Max J. Kopf (1893-1971)

Max J. Kopf was born in Bad Aibling, a small town in Bavaria, southern Germany. The family later moved to Schliersee, a resort on a glacial lake in the foothills of the Alps where his father owned and operated the Hotel Seehaus-Terofals. In 1914, when World War I broke out, dad enlisted in the Kaiser's army and, thereafter, participated in numerous military engagements. As his successive superiors died in combat, his rank increased until he was given a field commission of second lieutenant. Near the end of the war, he was wounded by shrapnel, nearly bayonetted, captured, and interned as a prisoner of war. He was freed in 1920.

The war had curtailed tourism so drastically that his dad lost the hotel. Max's first job was as a travel agent. After marrying Anna Meir, the couple found post-war Germany intolerable; runaway inflation was eroding their savings, a socialistic form of govenment had greatly diminished property rights, and competing political parties were promoting dangerous civil disturbances. Therefore he, his wife, and now I, Rudolph, at 15 months, the first of his three sons, emigrated to the U.S. on the North German Lloyd steamship "Bremen," landing January 1, 1924.

We settled in Buffalo, N. Y., where dad tried several jobs, including co-owner of a travel agency and tobacco store, weighmaster at a meat factory, and selling Airway brand vacuum cleaners door to door. Finally, he was offered a position as field agent with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company provided he move to Lancaster, 11 miles east of Buffalo, and purchase and learn to drive a car, an offer that he eagerly accepted. After WW II, the family moved back to Buffalo so that his two older sons could attend what was then called the Universitry of Buffalo. He retired about 1970.

Dad was about 5' 8" tall and rather portly, his weight vacilating between 160 and 200 pounds. His always stood erect and walked with a lively step. He was a gentleman of the old school that had standards of conduct. For example, when the doorbell rang, he would never appear in shirtsleeves but would always slip into his suit coat before opening the door.

One of dad's last letters (copy enclosed) explains how he became interested in collecting fossils. That interest was reawakened when he became aware of the highly fossiliferous Paleozoic strata in western New York State. He found numerous fossils but, being endowed with a rich imagination and unhampered by a knowledge of taxonomy, his initial identifications were highly fanciful. He brought puzzling forms to the Buffalo Museum of Science where he met its curator of paleontology, Irving Reimann.

In their first meeting, dad told Mr. Reimann excitedly that he had found the track of a dinosaur in shale at Cazenovia Creek! Rather than rediculing dad for suggesting that a terrestrial dinosaur had lived on the bottom of a Middle Devonian sea, Reimann tactfully suggested that dad

find a second print so as to determine the length of its stride and, therefore, its size. (The "print" turned out to be nothing more than the impression of one of many locally-common septarian concretions.) Reimann then lent dad a copy of Amadeus Grabau's "Paleontology of Eighteen Mile Creek" which contained numerous illustrations of Devonian invertebrate fossils common in western New York. This started dad indescriminatingly collecting all the fossils he could find. These he stored in cigar boxes, each carefully labeled as to locality.

My first recollections of field trips was with my parents but in which I and my two younger brothers were more interested in swimming than fossil collecting. One Sunday morning, my dad announced that I had a choice; I could either go to church with my mother as usual or I could stay home and help him prepare fossils. Naturally, I chose the latter. Using a needle and brush, the first fossil I prepared was what he then thought was a fossilized hazel nut in limestone. It was later identified as the plate of a blastoid. Nevertheless, I became the collection's preparator.

One Sunday about 1931, when I was about 9, he shocked me by mutilating a map! He cut the North and South American continents from a map of the world and, moving the cutouts against Europe and Africa, showed me how well the coastlines fit. He explained that he had just read a book in German by Alfred Wegener. Such a close fit had suggested to Wegener that the continents must have moved apart, a process Wegener called "continental drift." The hypothesis seemed logical to me at the time. Unfortunately, I dismissed it as coincidence only to adopt it decades later under the new term "plate tectonics."

Soon, the number of fossil-filled cigar boxes increased to such a point that dad realized that he needed to specialize. Since the echinoderms were rare, he chose to collect these. Another amateur collector, Raymond Hibbard, living in Buffalo, specialized in collecting bryozoa. Since Mr. Hibbard neither owned nor drove a car, dad would pick up Raymond and his wife Esther on a Sunday. We - my dad, mother, and I - would contribute all the bryozoa we found to Mr. Hibbard and the Hibbards would contribute all the echinoderms to dad. The evening would be highlighted by Esther serving us the most delicious baked beans and bacon in their kitchen.

Dad was also an avid reader and methodical researcher and assembled a considerable library of Paleozopic invertebrate paleontology including the monumental works of James Hall and his associates. When he found fossils he couldn't identify, he would send them to specialists including New York State Paleontologist Winifred Goldring, paleobotanist Chester Arnold, paleoichtheologist Husakoff, Harold Strimple, Raymond Bassler, Gus Cooper, and Kenneth Caster. Even though dad had no formal education in geology or paleontology, he found that specialists were eager to identify his finds. As the collection grew in size and fame, specialists would visit him. One regular visitor was

the late Dr. Sharat Kumar Roy, geologic curator of Chicago's Field Museum, who dad guided to good fossil localities.

Dad's collecting style was unique. His first collections were from pebbles along the southern shore of Lake Erie. Unfortunately, the fossils were too abraded to be very instructive. He then collected in bedrock exposed by streams and rivers that had cut through extensive surficial glacial deposits. Later he preferred bare slopes where prolonged weathering reduced fossiliferous shale to clay and left its calcareous fossils exhumed. He would then carefully examine the surface by crawling up and down on his hands and knees. A brass 2 1/4 inch-long hand lens hung by a string around his neck. The lens (enclosed), apparently the eyepiece of an antique microscope, had a 1-inch focal length. Whenever he found a questionable item, he would sit up, clean the fossil by brushing off loose clay with an old toothbrush, and examine it carefully with his lens.

Occasionally, when he forgot his brush, he would pop the stone into his mouth, swish it around, spit out the mud, and examine the freshly-washed fossil. This worked well until one "fossil" in an exposure of Rochester Shale near Gasport dissolved unexpectedly. The exposure was in a pasture and his suspected "crinoid" turned out to be a sheep dropping!

Another time, again while dad was collecting in the Rochester Shale, but this time halfway down the Niagara Gorge on the American side of the river, one of two heavy-set policemen tapped on the car window in which my mother was napping. My mother recalled the conversation as follows:

"Is your husband in the gorge?"

"Yes."

"We dont want to alarm you but what was his mental attitude the last time you saw him?"

"Fine. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind. How is his physical condition?"

"Fine. Has anything happened to him? You MUST tell me!"

"Well, we've had a report from an observer using binoculars on the Canadian side of the river that a man was either trying to commit suicide or was having trouble getting out of the gorge because every time he'd climb partly up the gorge, he'd slide down again. We're here to rescue him."

Mother couldn't convince them that this was dad's method of collecting fossils. They insisted on climbing down to save him. However, they were so out of shape that he had to help THEM climb back up!

During World War II, while gasoline was severely rationed, dad took the train to a limestone quarry in Alpena, Michigan. Here he collected so many crinoid calyxes that he shipped them home in two large barrels! While there, he was caught in a midsummer thunder storm. To avoid the hail and downpour, he found shelter under an empty coffin lying in a nearby cemetary. After the rain finally ceased, he crawled out only to see a small boy on a bicycle watching him in horror and peddling away as fast as he could.

Later, dad visited Coon Creek, Tennessee, a ravine exposing Cretaceous fossils. A local fossil collector had volunteered as a guide. In midday, the clear sky became overcast which dad hardly noticed. When the sky darkened, the guide muttered something about "Gotta watch it." When some sprinkles fell, the guide yelled "Here she comes!" and scampered out of the ravine. To dad's amazement, a wall of water rushed down the deep gully and dad had to run for his life to get out of the ravine in time. Apparently the rain was heavier upstream and they seem to waste few words in that part of Tennessee!

One western New York farmer threw dad off of his pasture claiming that his cows were getting ill from swallowing nails, nails which my dad supposedly dropped in the pasture when using a "hammer" (his geologic pick).

Dad prided himself in his ability to find crinoids. One of his friends was Charles Southworth, another amateur collector in Thedford, Ontario. Mr. Southworth would guide dad to a shale quarry near a brick factory where rare crinoid calyxes could be found lying on clay. While collecting, he would goad dad good naturedly by following in dad's footsteps, picking up a crinoid, and saying: "Pick them up, Max. They aren't heavy!"

Another time dad sat on a tippy rock in the middle of a creek. He finally noticed a nearby water snake swimming upstream but, strangely, making no headway. Then he realized that, when the rock tipped, he was accidentally pinching the snake's tail!

Like most mushroom hunters, dad was rather secretive about revealing the exact location of some of his prime collecting localities. Accordingly, he would commonly record the fossil locality in German shorthand.

He once told my former classmate John Sargent, then curator of geology at the Buffalo Museum of Science, of the great diversity and excellent state of preservation of echinoderms in a quarry exposing Middle Ordovician limestone near Kirkfield, Ontario, Canada. Years later, John visited the quarry and not only found crinoids but a money clip containing an American dollar bill. John correctly concluded that it could only have been dad's and returned it, much to dad's surprise. Dad added the clip and its badly weather bill to the fossil collection as a conversation piece (see enclosed newspaper article).

Our dog, "Princie," was a small mongrel with predominant terrier traits (photo enclosed). He loved traveling. Once, spying a bull in a pasture, he encircled it repeatedly barking furiously. It wasn't long before the bull became enraged. When it charged Princie, he, terrorized, ran behind dad for protection. Both escaped through the fence just in time. It's amazing how adrenalin can increase one's speed and agility!

The best part of the fossil collection occupied eight stacks of drawers in cabinets, each about five feet high. The "fossil room" was off the dining room in our home on Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo. The drawers were originally designed to display spools of thread. When we had visitors,

he enjoyed displaying the fossils explaining their lifestyle, habitat, and significance. Each drawer had a single marble. Whenever he picked up a fossil, he would replace it with the marble to ensure that the fossil would be returned to its proper tray. The largest part of the collection, which included the slabs, was housed on racks in the basement.

He was always attracted to the rarest fossils, eventually finding and specializing in machaerida, pyrgocystis, lepidoculeus, and similar unusual marine invertebrate fossils, some then of uncertain taxonomic classification.

Dad often suggested to quarry operators that they set aside spectacular slabs of fossils. He purchased many of these with his meager savings, often with mother's disapproval but relieved that he had rescued them from the crusher.

Many of our prime fossil localities have become inaccessible. Some are flooded. Others have been buried under pavement, housing developments, shopping centers, and freeways and their right-of-ways. We were fortunate in having collected from these localities before they disappeared under the guise of progress.

Dad was also an accomplished zither player having learned in grade school. He would practice about three times a week, was a member and director of the Buffalo Zither Club, and gave lessons to about a dozen students at a time. He played the zither at a local restaurant and once played a solo during a performance of the Buffalo Symphony in Kleinhans Music Hall.

He raised three sons. Each enlisted in the Navy. I followed in dad's footsteps by becoming a geologist, using part of the collection from Livingston County, N. Y., as the basis for a master's thesis. My two younger brothers became physicians, Edi, a plastic surgeon, and Al, a dermatologist.

Dad never took himself too seriously, was an excellent husband and parent, an accomplished musician, a graceful dancer, and a cook excelling in roasts. He enjoyed talking to people, made friends easily, welcomed all geologists to his home, enjoyed life, had infinite patience, and a strong determination. Born with a thirst for knowledge, he was fascinated by fossils and became a self-educated and accomplished researcher. One of his most treasured legacies is the Kopf fossil collection which will most assuredly form the basis for continuing future scientific research into this planet's fascinating history.

Rudolph W. Kopf
U.S.G.S. ret.
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